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## E-Reporting

After years in development, the TCEQ's coordinated electronic reporting system has moved to the Internet. Online reporting benefits both the public and regulated entities.

### Electronic submittals start to replace paper reporting

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After years of building an electronic reporting system, the TCEQ has begun changing the way companies, municipalities, and other regulated entities submit reports and environmental data. The result should be a faster, more streamlined method of receiving information and displaying it to the public.

Ultimately, these advances could translate into savings of time and money for both the agency and the regulated entities. Electronic reporting is designed to reduce duplication and improve the accuracy of agency records.

The payoff from the years-long endeavor surfaced last year as some TCEQ programs started receiving reports online.

This spring, the agency began accepting Internet reports of "emission events," also known as air upsets and maintenance activity at industrial plants. The database for air emission events now provides companies with a timely method to submit reports and verify that agency-held data are accurate before being made public. Also, Internet users gain easy access to information about emission events within a few days of the occurrence. Before, viewing these reports required a visit to the nearest TCEQ regional office.

"These advancements will make it easier for the regulated community to do business with the agency, and allow the public better access to the information we collect," said Commissioner R.B. "Ralph" Marquez. "They also save agency resources, and improve the quality and timeliness of our data."

### Reports Pile Up

In its role to implement state and federal environmental laws, the TCEQ requires different reports from various entities whose activities affect air quality, water quality, or waste management. From tens of thousands of individual reports collected each year, the agency accrues massive amounts of data.

Development of electronic reporting had been in the works at the TCEQ since the early 1990s. Then the Legislature in 2001 instructed the agency to boost its use of reporting through the Internet. In response, staff began considering a proposal for coordinating all of the agency's existing electronic reporting and addressing such issues as Web security and accessibility.

The employee team drafted a plan of what the ideal electronic reporting system would look like. For the TCEQ, the ideal system would mean smooth data flow -- the transfer of information -- in the form of reports that industries send to the TCEQ, as well as the reports the TCEQ sends to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

"In the past, it wasn't unusual to find our programs using different forms of software, different methods to transfer

## Coordinated Electronic Reporting

These high-priority programs were among the first to begin reporting via the Internet. More than 90 TCEQ programs have been identified as candidates for electronic submittals over the coming years.

Programs implemented	Number of potential users	Number of yearly submittals
Industrial hazardous waste monthly receipts summary	240	2,500 - 5,000
Industrial hazardous waste notice of registration update	8,000	5,000 - 10,000
Annual waste summary	8,000	5,000 - 10,000
Emission events (air upsets/maintenance)	3,000	5,000 - 10,000
Due to be implemented		
Bacterial results	50	50,000
Source reduction waste management	900	500 - 2,500
Annual air emissions inventory update	2,000	500 - 2,500

*Note: The only reports that must be submitted via the Internet are those concerning industrial and hazardous waste and air emission events. However, small businesses in these fields are exempt from the online requirement.*

the information, and different ways of handling required signatures. The inconsistencies were confusing to the customers doing business with the TCEQ, and it was expensive for us to maintain due to the duplication of systems," said Greg Nudd, the TCEQ's manager of information strategic planning.

Also, the submission of multiple paper reports sometimes took months to work through, as staff manually keyed in information, he added.

After years spent designing and building the "shell," or the common infrastructure of the system, Nudd said the agency finally had a common platform for digital signatures, security, quality control, and record keeping.

Then, the Web version of the State of Texas Environmental Electronic Reporting System (WebSTEERS) was deployed in 2002, providing the foundation for reporting via the Internet.

This new application first opened the way for the electronic reporting over the Internet for industrial and hazardous waste reports, including annual waste summaries and monthly waste receipt summaries. It also allows customers to modify many data elements of the notice of registration.

Users obtain access by signing a participation agreement and mailing it to the TCEQ.

Some of the TCEQ programs on WebSTEERS are:

- **Self-certifications for petroleum storage tanks:** Tank owners may submit these forms annually to certify that their tanks meet regulatory requirements. Once set up in the TCEQ system, the owner can certify the tanks online and print out a copy of the certification for record keeping.
- **Storm water general permits for construction:** Clearing operations at small construction sites (fewer than five acres) must be performed under a TCEQ general permit to protect water quality. Users have the option of submitting these permit applications through the TCEQ Web site and paying the required fee using Web-based forms. For these permits, users can pay through the [TexasOnline](#) Web site by bank draft or credit card.
- **Emission events review and reporting:** The final reports for emission events are now being reported online. The reporting facility has an opportunity to review and contest the information before it is publicly displayed on the database. In the coming months, facilities will be able to file their initial reports electronically; by the end of the year, WebSTEERS will be able to receive batch emission event reports, rather than requiring users to fill out an individual form for each report.

## Security Concerns

One of the most difficult aspects of designing a coordinated electronic reporting system is addressing the security concerns that accompany use of a new technology.

"It is extremely important that electronically submitted reports be just as binding and enforceable as the existing paper reports," said Nudd. "And it's vital that the users' data be safe from unauthorized modifications during transmittal and storage."

He said the agency has mapped out extensive plans for ensuring the security of electronic submittals. Among the measures taken are use of data encryption, verification screens, password authentication, protected Web servers, and e-mail confirmations after completion of each submittal. The data are backed up nightly.

To address the issue of a digital signature replacing the ink-on-paper signature, the TCEQ requires a signed participation agreement stipulating that users will not share their password and that everything submitted under the user ID bears the weight of a written signature.

Preserving the validity of data received electronically is vital, said Nudd, because these reports potentially can trigger an enforcement action. As important, he added, is providing accurate and timely information about company operations to the public.

## E-Reporting Advances

With electronic reporting making headway, what's in store for the future?

More than 90 reports mandated by the TCEQ have been identified and prioritized for electronic submitting.

"We will march through our list of priorities, as resources allow," said Nudd. "We're about halfway through the high and medium priorities."

As more TCEQ programs become part of the coordinated system, reporting should become easier for regulated entities, and processing within the agency should be more efficient.

Although EPA has yet to issue rules on electronic reporting, the TCEQ designed its system in line with anticipated federal policies.

Much remains to be learned from this emerging field. How quickly will the regulated community embrace this new technology? Will the TCEQ have to do additional training and instruction to help users become comfortable with the

practice?

While those questions are being analyzed, Texas has become a leading developer of electronic reporting for environmental data. Few states have been as involved in formulating programs and policies on this issue.

The payoff is promising: users saving millions of dollars a year and the TCEQ improving the timeliness and accuracy of its data.

## ECOS Leaders Include TCEQ Commissioners

Chairman Robert J. Huston has been elected to serve as secretary-treasurer of the Environmental Council of the States (ECOS). As one of four officers of the national association, he will head up the funding committee, which oversees externally funded projects undertaken by the organization.

Huston was elected this spring by his peers -- environmental commissioners from other states -- at a meeting in Washington, D.C. He previously served as Region 6 representative on the executive committee.

Commissioner R.B. "Ralph" Marquez also is active in ECOS, continuing to serve as chairman of the standing air committee, one of the organization's most active committees.

ECOS was formed 10 years ago to represent state positions on environmental management policy issues before Congress, federal agencies, and the public.

## Texas Services Go Online

The TCEQ is one of many state agencies using the services of TexasOnline ([www.TexasOnline.com](http://www.TexasOnline.com) ).

The Web site was created in 2000 to serve as an electronic resource for local and state government services. Considered the state's official Web site, TexasOnline provides a single portal through which Texans may gain quick access to a host of online services, transactions, and information.

Users can renew their driver licenses, learn about Texas laws, and apply for a voter registration certificate. Businesses can pay sales taxes. At the local level, it is possible to check on utility payments, pay traffic fines, and file a consumer complaint.

Since January 2003, the TCEQ has used the site for:

- individual registrations and credit card payments for agency seminars,
- registrations and credit card payments for vendor booths at seminars, and
- electronic submittals and payments for construction storm water permits.

The participation rate the first three months was 20–30 percent.

Because online registrations and payments reduce the agency's administrative costs, the TCEQ is not charging a handling fee for now. The agency does pay the service providers, but those payments are more than recouped by the savings in paper processing and data entry.

Anyone using TexasOnline to do business with state agencies and local governments can pay with credit cards or electronic checking. The Web site was designed with the highest level of security and ensures that all information remains confidential.

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